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ABSTRACT

Noting that parents often receive little support during their child's first weeks and months, this paper discusses how voluntary home visiting for families with young children can help provide parents of all educational, economic, and cultural backgrounds with the information, advice, and support they need in their new role. The paper notes the importance of the early years for brain development, early relationships with parents and other caregivers, and development of confidence. The report presents evidence that new parents lack confidence about caring for their infant and seek support and guidance. The role of the home visitor is discussed, including ways in which home visitors build on the natural capacities and interests of a family and how they break the isolation often felt by new parents. Evidence from longitudinal studies is presented regarding the effectiveness of home visiting related to healthy child development, parent-child bonding, parental self-sufficiency, and its cost-effectiveness relative to intervention and treatment services for child abuse. Characteristics of successful home visitor programs are outlined: (1) voluntary; (2) relationship-based; (3) focused on the parent-child relationship; (4) culturally responsive and respectful; and (5) tailored to fit each family's situation and strengths. Myths about home visiting related to parents' rights, privacy, the nature of parenting, and dependency on government programs are also addressed. The report concludes by asserting that creating networks of home visiting programs nationwide can ensure that families with young children have the support and tools they need to be the best parents they can be. (KB)

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Brighter Babies, Stronger Families

How home visitors help families grow together

ED 449 909

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An Ounce of Prevention Fund Paper

On my way home from the hospital with my first son, I had mixed feelings. It was rewarding - he was so tiny and precious. It was scary. What if he does something I'm not prepared for? What if I do something wrong?

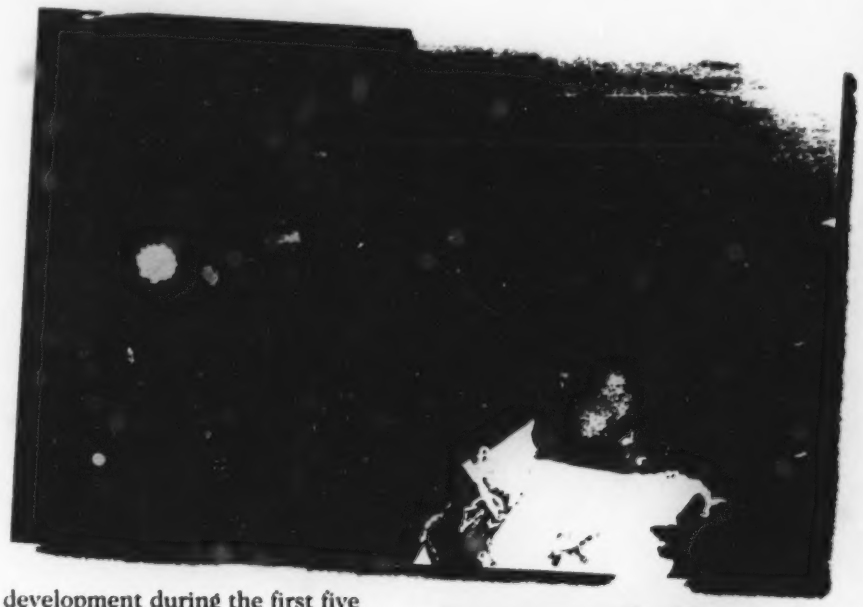
ANA, ROCKFORD

These same thoughts run through the minds of many new parents. Caring for their completely dependent newborn, they are awestruck by the magnitude of the responsibility they have undertaken. Research confirms that a child's experiences during the earliest weeks, months and years of her life lay the foundation for all that is to follow. Yet it is during this same period in a child's life that families — faced with all the demands, anxieties and excitement of parenthood — often receive little support and attention. Voluntary home visiting for families with young children can help provide parents of all educational, economic, and cultural backgrounds the information, advice and support they need in their new role.

The Early Years: A Window of Opportunity

Research in early childhood education and brain development supports the important role home visiting programs play in the lives of young children and their families. We now have scientific proof that the early years represent our best opportunity to promote healthy infant and child development. We know:

- Children are learning from the moment they are born and experience their most rapid brain development during the first five years of life. Many of the brain's functions are not "hard-wired" at birth but develop, for better or for worse, in response to experience.
- Early relationships with parents and other caregivers actually shape biological systems and the formation of neural pathways, which affect a child's ability to control emotions, relate well to others, and learn. Parents' interactions with their child — touching and holding, rocking and reading, talking and singing — foster the child's healthy emotional, cognitive and physical development.
- Children who develop confidence that they can solve problems, are encouraged to reach achievable goals, can express feelings and ideas, and who know how to control their behavior and cooperate with others, arrive at school ready to learn. All these skills have their origins in healthy parent-child relationships and lay the foundation for learning at home and in school, and for later success in the workplace and in personal relationships.[1]



Parents are Seeking Support and Guidance

Becoming a parent is challenging for everyone. As Christine, a participant in a home visiting program in Champaign County, Illinois, says, "We're all kind of surprised by parenting. You do kind of think this is going to be easy." A recent national survey of parents with young children found that more than half of first-time parents do not feel confident about caring for their infant upon leaving the hospital.[2] For many families, poverty and isolation — whether in

The Ounce of Prevention Fund was established in 1982 as a public/private partnership to promote the well-being of children and adolescents by working with families, communities, and policy-makers. The Ounce's work is based on the conviction that it is more cost-effective and caring to prevent physical, social, and psychological problems early on than to treat such problems later in life. The Ounce of Prevention has compiled this paper, which has been developed from the work of a number of researchers and practitioners, to raise awareness of issues vital to early childhood development.

urban or rural settings — exacerbate the stress and uncertainty normally associated with parenting. In all, seventy-nine percent of parents feel they need more information and guidance in many areas of child rearing, such as caring for an infant, understanding sleep patterns, responding to a baby's crying, toilet training, discipline, and encouraging learning.[3] Yet finding information and support can be difficult, and parents may feel that they do not have anyone to turn to with their inevitable questions and concerns.

HOME VISITING WORKS

Longitudinal research has documented that collaborative models partnering home visiting with child care, parent group meetings, and other support services in the earliest years of children's lives are the most cost effective means of enhancing child development and lowering the risk of later educational, health, or social problems:

Healthy Child Development — Families receiving home visits have fewer low birth weight babies, fewer confirmed reports of child abuse and neglect, higher rates of child immunizations, and more age-appropriate child development — all of which mean real cost savings in the long run.[4]

Parent-Child Bonding — Home visits help parents develop more positive attitudes toward and better interactions with their children, and families retain many of these gains over time.[5]

Self-Sufficiency — Low-income parents receiving quality home visits, health care and child care services from the time of their child's birth can go farther in their education, gain greater financial independence and find that their children are more successful in school.[6]

Cost-Effectiveness — Home visits for one family for an entire year can cost from $3,000 to $7,000, depending on the family's needs and the structure of the program. In contrast, intervention and treatment services once a parent has abused her child can cost $50,000 or more a year.[7]

Traditionally, extended families have been the primary vehicle for passing on child rearing "know-how," with older members offering advice and acting as role models for inexperienced parents. Today, however, extended families are not always able to provide this support: they may live far away or may be under extreme stress and need support themselves. New parents may also receive conflicting messages from friends and relatives about how to raise their child, or may have particular difficulty providing sensitive care because of their own experiences early in life. For all of these reasons, families may look to community resources such as health care providers, church groups and parent-child centers for information and support in parenting.

Parents are seeking accurate information and access to needed resources. Home visitors enter the life of a family just at that moment when the family needs them the most and when parents are most open to receiving information and creating a new relationship that centers around caring for their newborn. As a neutral source of support, specially trained home visitors give parents solid information based on research about how to facilitate their child's healthy development. They play a particularly vital role for families who live in communities where primary health care services, transportation and other community resources are not available or accessible.

Strengthening Families: The Role of the Home Visitor

Home visits work in a number of ways to promote self-sufficiency, enhance child development, prevent abuse and neglect, develop the parent-child relationship and link families to community resources. Parents learn how to positively and effectively respond to their child and how to draw on their inner strengths, as well as community resources, to define their own goals, make their own decisions and take positive steps toward reaching their goals.

Home visitors build on the natural strengths, capacities and interests of a family by:

- Helping parents identify and strengthen their natural parenting instincts;
- Modeling parenting skills;
- Answering questions and providing guidance about what parents should expect as their child grows and develops;
- Sharing information about child health and development, ways to build a strong relationship with their child, and managing stress;
- Enhancing the parents' self-esteem and confidence in their parenting ability, which carries over to areas like school, work, and other relationships;
- Motivating and supporting parents in caring for their children, accomplishing their own goals, and moving toward self-sufficiency;
- Respecting and understanding the family's cultural and religious heritage and the environment in which the family lives; and
- Serving as a referral source to other community services such as health care, parks and libraries, parent support groups, and social opportunities.

Breaking the isolation

Home visits are a wonderful way to break the isolation that a parent, particularly a highly vulnerable parent, may feel prior to giving birth or when first arriving home with her newborn. During the early months, when the developing relationship and interactions between parent and child are so critical to the infant's emotional development, many new parents get little time away from their infant. They may be exhausted, scared or confused by their baby's behavior. A parent's misunderstanding of child development and behavior can lead to frustration and stress. By bringing meaning to things that are confusing or baffling for new parents, home visitors alleviate some of the stress associated with any new experience or responsibility.

I started having early contractions and it was a really, really hard pregnancy. After I had the baby, Jeanie, my home visitor, came to see me. I guess I was going through post-partum depression. The baby's father was going to school and working and (had) a daily routine. I was all by myself. When I noticed the baby's stomach turning yellow, Jeanie explained to me about jaundice and what to do. She would show me how to hold the baby. She made a list of things I needed to do to take care of myself because I needed to take care of myself so I could take care of my baby."

BARBARA, CHICAGO

Trained home visitors spend time with pregnant women or new parents in their homes talking about their hopes, concerns and expectations surrounding parenthood, listening to parents' frustrations and concerns about their children, and providing information about key stages of child development. Especially right after birth, mothers may be bound to the home by the needs of their newborns and by the extra planning and preparation required to leave the home with an infant. These connections with other caring adults give parents the support they need to be successful in their important work of parenting.

Ingredients for Success

Voluntary early childhood home visiting programs — beginning during pregnancy, at birth or soon after — may differ in their specific goals based on the population being served and the agency or institution that administers the program; but successful programs share key characteristics.

Voluntary

As a preventive strategy, home visiting programs for new parents and those with young children are completely voluntary. Any family offered or receiving prevention-focused home visits is free to decline or discontinue services at any time, and there are no consequences of not accepting services. Experience has shown, however, that a majority of all new parents offered these services welcome them.

Relationship-based

Frequent home visits provide families with the consistency necessary to build a trusting relationship with a home visitor over time. This relationship allows information and guidance to be presented in a non-threatening way that is likely to be accepted. Many parents do not have someone to model their parenting style after or have only experienced unhealthy parenting patterns themselves. Because it is difficult for new parents to give their infants what they themselves have not received as a child, their relationship with the home visitor can help them realize more positive expectations for their child. Often, home visitors recognize that a critical part of their role is bolstering a parent's own sense of worth and competence at parenting.

My child is going through the terrible twos now. I feel that I must be doing something wrong, but my home visitor tells me that this is normal behavior for my son at this age. She gives me information, advice and things to read. But more than anything, she is reassuring and provides support.

ANA, ROCKFORD

The relationship between parent and home visitor provides a psychologically safe place for parents to share what they are feeling and experiencing. Within the context of this relationship, parents can master the more intimate functions of parenting — feeding, bathing, and changing an infant's diaper — that are not comfortably taught or learned in a large group.

Myths About Home Visiting

MYTH

Home visiting programs weaken parents' rights. Home visitors judge and evaluate parents to decide if they are fit or "good enough" parents and tell parents how to raise their children.

FACT

Home visitors offer information, guidance and support, and are always mindful that parents are the most influential and important people in children's lives. Parents and home visitors work in partnership to set goals and determine activities. And parents ultimately remain the primary decision makers, retaining their full rights to raise their children as they believe is best.

MYTH

Home visits are an invasion of privacy - an intrusion of government into the home and private family matters.

FACT

Home visitors only come into the home at the parents' invitation. A majority of new parents welcome and accept these voluntary services which are usually provided by community-based agencies.

MYTH

Parenting is instinctual.

FACT

Parenting is learned behavior. While it may come more easily to those who have had positive role models, all parents rely on formal and informal sources of information and support - like family members, books, courses, friends, and health care professionals - to raise their children. In a recent representative survey of parents from around the country, the overwhelming majority of parents said they would like more information on child rearing.

MYTH

Publicly-funded home visiting and child care programs increase dependency on government programs and further contribute to the disintegration of the American family, as evidenced by increased rates of teen pregnancy, divorce and school failure.

FACT

Investment in prevention and early intervention programs like voluntary home visiting services and high quality child care actually prevents these poor outcomes. Longitudinal research shows that home visiting programs are a cost-effective way to promote healthy child development, prevent child abuse and neglect, and move families toward self-sufficiency.

Focused on the parent-child relationship

The world of parent and newborn is such an intimate one. Home visitors help to foster and sustain strong positive and caring relationships between the parent and her newborn by teaching the parent to interpret and respond to her child's cues. Parents and children need to experience a sense of trust and security, a sense of exploration, and a sense of identity. Home visitors strive to foster effective communication between parent and child, leading to secure attachment and to engagement with each other.

Recognizing the important role that other family members play in the life of the parent and child, home visitors also work to build relationships with fathers, grandparents and other caretakers. They stress the key role that fathers can play in promoting the healthy emotional development of their child — both in terms of financial and emotional support. And, where appropriate, they try to include grandparents in reinforcing what the parent is learning about child development and parenting.

Culturally responsive and respectful

Supporting parent-child relationships requires an understanding of the cultural and religious context in which families and children live, while helping to involve them in a common culture shared by all. Home visitors provide valuable, accurate information that respects the family customs and beliefs that may play an important role in connecting children to their cultural group, making them feel accepted, and keeping them safe within their environment. Home visitors are conscious of the fact that they go into a family's private "space" to do their work. They acknowledge the family's strengths, let the family make the decisions, and follow the parents' cues. In many situations, young parents live with their own family of origin. Home visitors work to earn the trust and acceptance of each member of the maternal family system and sometimes provide support to the extended family as well.

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Tailored to fit each family's situation and strengths

Providing services in the participant's natural environment and observing how a parent and child interact are vital to helping home visitors effectively do their work. By seeing families in the settings in which they live and grow every day, including extended family members who play a role in caretaking, home visitors can effectively tailor services to the unique situation and strengths of each family. This helps the home visitor suggest options that are realistic for the family. For example, can the family create a quiet place in the home to read to the child? Would center-based activities be helpful or difficult to attend due to a lack of transportation or the level of neighborhood violence? By recognizing and acknowledging the family's strengths and needs, the home visitor can determine the frequency and intensity of services that make sense for the family and better help parents meet the needs of their children.

Conclusion

Nearly four million times each year, parents all across the country experience the excitement, hopefulness and anxiety that go along with bringing home a newborn. Armed with knowledge, support and reassurance, they can form strong, lasting relationships with their children, increasing the chances that they get off to the best possible start in life. At a time when more families are isolated and living under stress and rates of child abuse and neglect among young children continue to rise, all sectors of society must invest in the healthy development of our youngest citizens by supporting new families. Creating networks of home visiting programs in all states can ensure that families with young children have the support and tools they need to be their child's primary caregiver and teacher, lay the foundation for their child's success in school and later life, and be the best parents they can be.

Notes

1 Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children. (1994). *Starting points: meeting the needs of our youngest children.* New York: Carnegie Corporation.

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3 Ibid.

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5 Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research, National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse. (1996). *Intensive Home Visitation: A Randomized Trial. Follow-up and Risk Assessment Study of Hawaii's Healthy Start Program.* Chicago: Author.

6 Seitz, V. *et al.* (1985). Effects of family support intervention: A ten-year follow-up. *Child Development, Vol. 56,* 376-391.

7 Massachusetts Children's Trust Fund. (1993). *A Report on Newborn Home Visiting Programs in Massachusetts.* Boston, MA: Author.

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